

# HENNEPIN COUNTY HISTORY

WINTER 85/86





*Louise and her "Special Children"*

**Fraser School Celebrates  
Louise Whitbeck Fraser and  
50 Years of Caring  
for Special Children**





*The Fraser School today at 2400 W. 64th St. in Richfield.*

*"If man cannot keep pace  
with his companions, perhaps  
it is because he hears a  
different drummer. Let him  
keep pace with the music that  
he hears — however measured,  
or far away."*

*Thoreau*

*by Tom Balcom*

This famous quotation appears on the front cover of the Louise Whitbeck Fraser Community Services golden anniversary promotional brochure. Today this Richfield-based organization is a multi-program, non-profit corporation serving the basic needs of the mentally handicapped individual from infancy to adulthood. What were its humble beginnings a half a century ago? They revolve around Louise Whitbeck Fraser and her remarkable efforts in special education that have made the gift of life far more beautiful for many mentally handicapped children and their families. Mrs. Fraser and the parents and children of Fraser School have all suffered great personal tragedies, but have been able to turn their setbacks into stepping stones and thus live much more full and rewarding lives.

Louise Whitbeck was born in Rochester, New York in 1894. Her father died when she was two and her mother died a year later. Louise was raised in Rochester by an aunt, a very prim and proper person. Her aunt's

strict discipline style did not sit very well with Louise. She remembers being home alone at her aunt's house one day, going up to the attic, and yelling as loud as she could, "Damn, Damn, Damn!" in frustration about her upbringing. It was as if a heavy burden had been lifted, for she never repeated this act again in her life, even though she had many reasons and occasions to do so in the years to come.

Louise moved to Grand Forks, North Dakota, where she attended Valley City Normal School and earned her teaching certificate. She taught school there for a few years and was often given problem children because of the gift she had of getting through to them. "If there was a problem child they always said, 'Give 'em to Whitbeck'," Louise remembered. In one specific instance, she recalled that, "... the principal told me that when one of my students arrived, I was to give him a good spanking and then he would behave. I thought it was terrible. You just have to give them a little love."

In 1917, Louise married Wesley A. Fraser, a government agent for the F.B.I. A year later, Mary Lou was born and then their second daughter, Jean, was born in 1920, beginning a decade of setbacks and tragedies for Louise and the Fraser family. When only six weeks old, Jean contracted Spinal Meningitis with a 106 to 107 degree fever for 23 days. Jean survived this ordeal, but was diagnosed as retarded for the first 12 years of her life. The Fraser's first son was born a few years later, but at age 3, he fell out of the family car and was killed. In 1927 another son, Wesley, Jr., was born. One morning the following year, Mr. Wesley Fraser told Louise that he had just one more undercover assignment before he would be getting a new job. When he arrived at a house to investigate a moonshine operation, the owner politely showed him to the basement and then shot him dead.

Louise persevered and in 1931 she moved her three children to 5028 38th Avenue in

*Right: A crowded class at Mrs. Fraser's Home Study School in the 1940's.*

*Below: The first Home Study School in Mrs. Fraser's house, at 5019 38th Avenue South in 1935.*



south Minneapolis. Her 11 year old daughter, Jean, was very wild at times and generally difficult to bring up, especially for a single parent with two other children. Louise took Jean to the University of Minnesota for tests and they found that she could hear very high sounds and very low ones, but in the conversational range she was "stone deaf." Thus, Jean's wildness was due to frustration over her deafness, not retardation.

Mrs. Fraser won a scholarship in Commercial Art, but after her studies she found no employment because the country was in the depths of the Great Depression. Louise began teaching Jean at home while she waited for her to be accepted to a school for the deaf. Music therapy was the cornerstone of Louise's teaching program. Word spread and parents asked her to tutor their retarded children. During this time, the Frasers moved across the street to 5019 38th Avenue South and Louise began taking children into her home. Against the advice of profession-



als (University of Minnesota mental health officials called her a fraud), Mrs. Fraser officially opened a school for retarded children in her home in 1935. Seven children attended the Home Study School the first year, each paying \$4.00 a week for all-day school out of which Mrs. Fraser paid a woman to take them to and from her house.

At that time, the history of care for the mentally handicapped was a dismal one, not offering much hope for Mrs. Fraser's pioneering effort. Since the industrial revolution, our society had dealt with individuals who deviated from the norm by containing them within institutions. Labels or names such as asylums and institutes for the feeble-minded helped solidify society stereotypes against the mentally handicapped. In these institutions, education was either non-existent or de-emphasized in favor of medicine treatment, segregation, and sterilization.

In the early 1900s, comprehensive programming for the mentally handicapped





began to receive increasing attention through community clinics, day care centers, school programs, workshops, residential units, counseling and research. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s meant that financial support for the new programs was cut drastically and that education and treatment for the mentally handicapped was again at a standstill. This was the history and environment of care for the mentally handicapped that Mrs. Fraser faced when she first opened her Home Study School in 1935.

During the Home Study's School's first year, Jean Fraser was accepted to Agassiz School for the Deaf at Old East High School across the river from downtown Minneapolis. Jean had to take three streetcars to get to school. For the next four years, Jean was painstakingly taught to lip read and speak by Roman Catholic nuns at the school. In 1939, Jean was joined on her streetcar rides by her older sister, Mary Lou, who was studying law at the University of Minnesota.

One day Mary Lou got a staph infection and three days later she died. Jean was devastated and grieved outwardly day after day at school. Because she had been exhibiting a lot of independence and an ability to teach at Agassiz School, the nuns recommended that Mrs. Fraser take Jean out of school to help her at the Home Study School. Jean became a successful teacher of the mentally handicapped at the school, understanding the children and their reactions because she had experienced them herself.

Mrs. Fraser had a warmth and a receptiveness to all who suffered from mental retardation. At first, she was reluctant to include mongoloid (Down Syndrome) children in the school, but could not turn distraught parents down, because there were no other avenues of assistance. Nancy, her first Down Syndrome student, was not a pretty child, according to Mrs. Fraser. She wore glasses and had crossed eyes and a large tongue; breathing and swallowing were performed unpleasantly; her features were

distorted. Mrs. Fraser remembered how Nancy's unattractiveness separated her from other children: "One morning when we were having a work group of some type, the children had all gathered around me. And then, off to the side, I saw little Nancy very much alone and, realizing her isolation from the other students, I suddenly forgot all the unpleasantness of her physical characteristics. All I could see was a child that was lost and hurt. I held out my arms and said, 'Come on, Nancy, I love you, too.' She just ran to me as though I were a lifesaver in a drowning sea and put her arms around my neck and cried. I loved Nancy from then on. I could overlook her bad points. I didn't see them anymore. I could see her human traits, she had feelings like any normal child."

Enrollment in the Home Study School had increased to 15 children by 1939, so Mrs. Fraser opened her school that year in a vacant house at 17 East Elmwood Avenue just east of 51st and Nicollet in south Minneapolis. However, through neighborhood

opposition or loss of lease or both, Mrs. Fraser was forced to look elsewhere for her school in 1940. She consulted Minneapolis authorities about where she could purchase a new residence and continue to teach her school. They provided her with maps of where such a school would be allowed and she purchased a house within the permitted boundaries at 4101 Sheridan Avenue South.

The 1940-41 school year opened at Mrs. Fraser's home with 25 children in attendance. During that first year, the school was visited by a policeman answering a complaint of neighbors that there were children tied in their beds and that nearby property values were going down. Mrs. Fraser invited the policeman in, showing him youngsters working at the dining room table and the little ones on the sun porch with Jean. In addition, she showed him the beds upstairs where only the Fraser family slept. However, with continued neighborhood opposition and the lack of support from city officials, Mrs. Fraser was prohibited from

## CALLING ATTENTION TO THE NEW ADDRESS OF

*The Home Study School*

4101 Sheridan Avenue South

*Whittier 0233*

**The Private Day School for Special Children**

**LOUISE WHITBECK FRASER**

**Director**





*The Fraser home at 4101 Sheridan Avenue South served as the school in 1940 and as a residence for Louise and Jean for four decades.*



*The new Home Study School building in 1949 — a converted machine shop at 6301 Penn Avenue South in Richfield.*





*above and clockwise) Ruth Bremberg  
with a class working to develop  
physical co-ordination and group  
participation skills — a class  
grouping from the early 50's —*

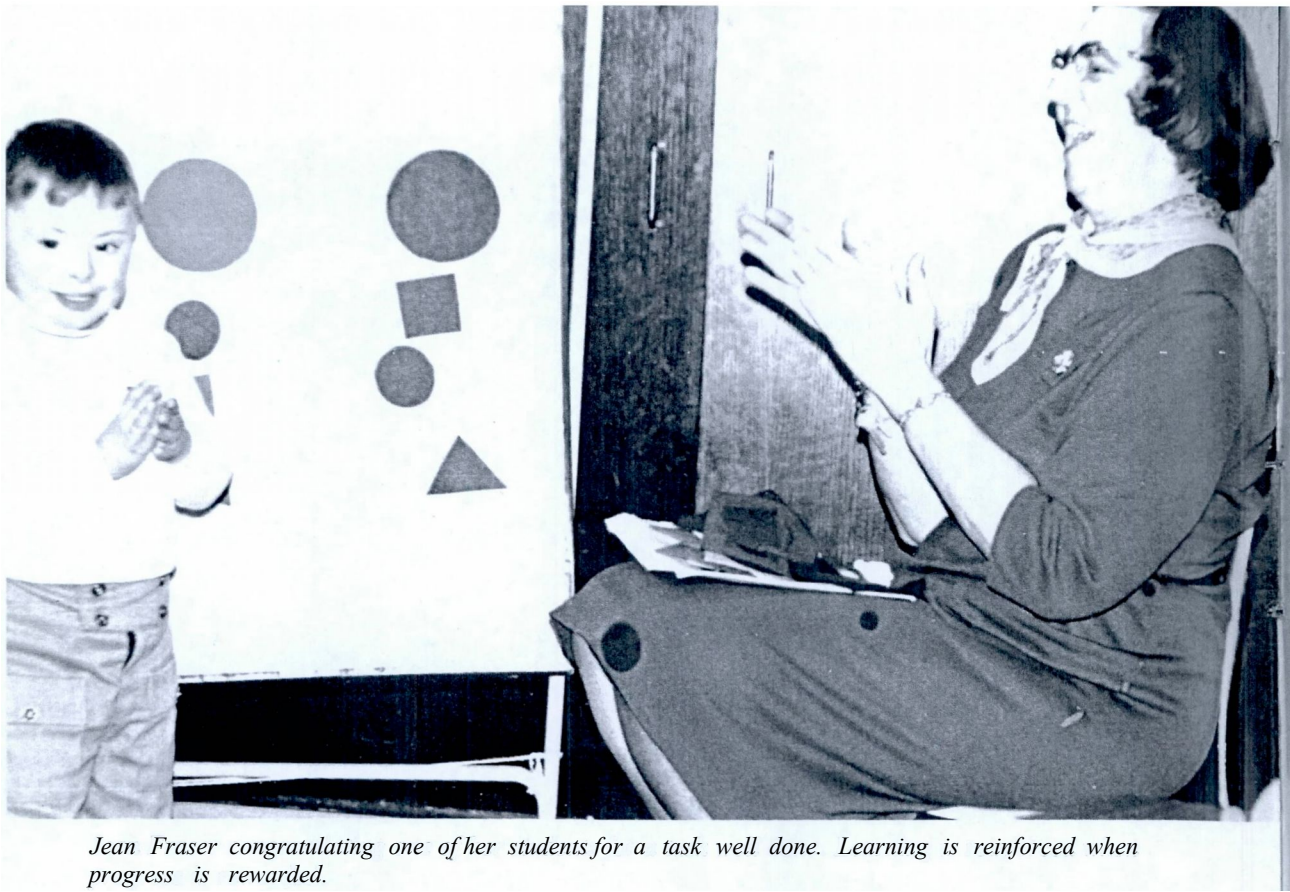
*Mrs. Fraser (rt) and Mrs. Anne  
Gunderson, the first additional  
teacher at the Home Study School c. 1940  
— Mrs. Fraser in the (lower) photos  
sharing with the children some of the  
music therapy techniques that have  
been so successful*











*Jean Fraser congratulating one of her students for a task well done. Learning is reinforced when progress is rewarded.*

holding school in her house in 1941.

For the rest of the decade of the 1940s, the school was held in commercial district store-front buildings, one year at Lake and Hennepin and the next seven years at 43rd and Upton Avenue South. These locations avoided the problems that the school had experienced when it operated in residential neighborhoods. However, a continuing problem for the school, regardless of where it was located, was a lack of space. The enrollment had grown to 32 and many had to be turned away or put on a waiting list. In 1949, Mrs. Fraser and some enthusiastic parents met and planned for a new facility, published a brochure, and started a fund-raising effort. They found a former machine shop building at 63rd and Penn Avenue in Richfield. Mrs. Fraser had to mortgage her house to help pay for the purchase and conversion costs. The new three room facility and adjacent playground space was opened for school in the Fall of 1949.

Music therapy continued to be the major

technique utilized in educating the mentally handicapped children at the Home Study School. The music program Mrs. Fraser developed aided in changing moods, relaxation, increased attention span, muscular coordination, and preparation for writing. Mrs. Fraser was able to hire her first full-time music teacher, Ruth Bremberg, in the early 1950s.

The Home Study School was becoming known throughout the community and in other areas of the country, as care for mentally handicapped children was finally becoming a profession in the 1950s. A doctor from the University of Minnesota, the same institution that shunned her efforts and called her a fraud 15 years earlier, stated, "I am glad to write in behalf of the excellent work Mrs. Fraser and her staff are doing for the exceptional children under her care. The need for such educational services in any community is great and cannot be over-emphasized. This program merits the support of everyone interested in the excep-

tional child. No wiser investment could be made."

Over the next few years, the enrollment grew to over 50 and the Home Study School was crowded again. The school incorporated in 1955 and the Board of Directors started another fund drive for an expansion of the school building. Mrs. Fraser was always an indomitable spirit in these fundraising efforts. For "her children", Louise was always ready to take financial risks, never accepted the word "try" in raising money, and quoted the Bible to those who doubted by saying, " . . . ye of little faith." Of course, the money was raised and the school was enlarged and remodeled in 1960.

The decade of 1960s continued the tradition of growth and recognition established in the previous 10 years. The remodeling and expansion allowed the enrollment to increase to 60 children, ranging in age from three to twenty years old.

1960 was a fateful year for the Hubert H. Humphrey family, and ultimately, for the Home Study School. On election night, November 8, 1960, Hubert H. Humphrey was re-elected to the U.S. Senate, and became a grandfather when his daughter, Nancy, gave birth to a baby girl. However, the Humphrey family's joy soon turned to anxiety and tragedy when they learned that baby Vicky had Down Syndrome.

The Humphrey family became aware of the Fraser School and in 1963 enrolled Vicky in the program. Muriel Humphrey became personally involved and interested in Vicky's education at Fraser School and found that:

*"The joy of getting to know a little retarded child is something that you will never know until you experience it personally. The care and extra time and thought that you must take for a child of this type leads to further love. And she's so loving."*

The Louise Whitbeck Fraser School (renamed in 1965 to honor its founder), continued to grow in the mid-60s. In 1967, an entirely new facility was built at 2400 West 64th Street in Richfield (only two blocks

from the Penn Avenue site) at a cost of \$300,000. An addition was completed in 1971, finishing off a \$1.5 million special education complex, serving approximately 100 area handicapped children and adults.

This dynamic growth for the Louise Whitbeck Fraser School was due in part to the notoriety brought by the support and involvement of Hubert and Muriel Humphrey. A more important factor, however, was the good staff people Mrs. Fraser surrounded herself with. Robert Kowalczyk was one of those key appointments when he was picked by Mrs. Fraser as the school's executive director in 1967, a position he still holds today.

In the early 1970s, with Kowalczyk's help and encouragement, Louise Whitbeck Fraser wrote a book entitled, "A Cup of Kindness: A Book for Parents of Retarded Children." It is here that Mrs. Fraser best expressed the philosophy which has guided her efforts and inspired her success:

*Did you ever feel the confidence of a little child's hand in yours? It is silent communication that expresses security and trust.*

*It is a silent asking of guidance through the entanglement of confusion in untraveled ways.*

*You give these things to the child when you give your hand to him.*

*You are the privileged one. Yours is true service for it must come from the heart if it is to fulfill that earnest appeal felt in the little outstretched hand of a child in need of security.*

Louise Whitbeck Fraser died on January 27, 1976 at the age of 81. The conclusion of Hubert H. Humphrey's tribute to Louise Whitbeck Fraser says it all:

*"Minnesota has lost a great lady. The special children of Minnesota and their parents have lost an inspired teacher. Mrs. Humphrey and I — and our family — have lost a dear friend."*

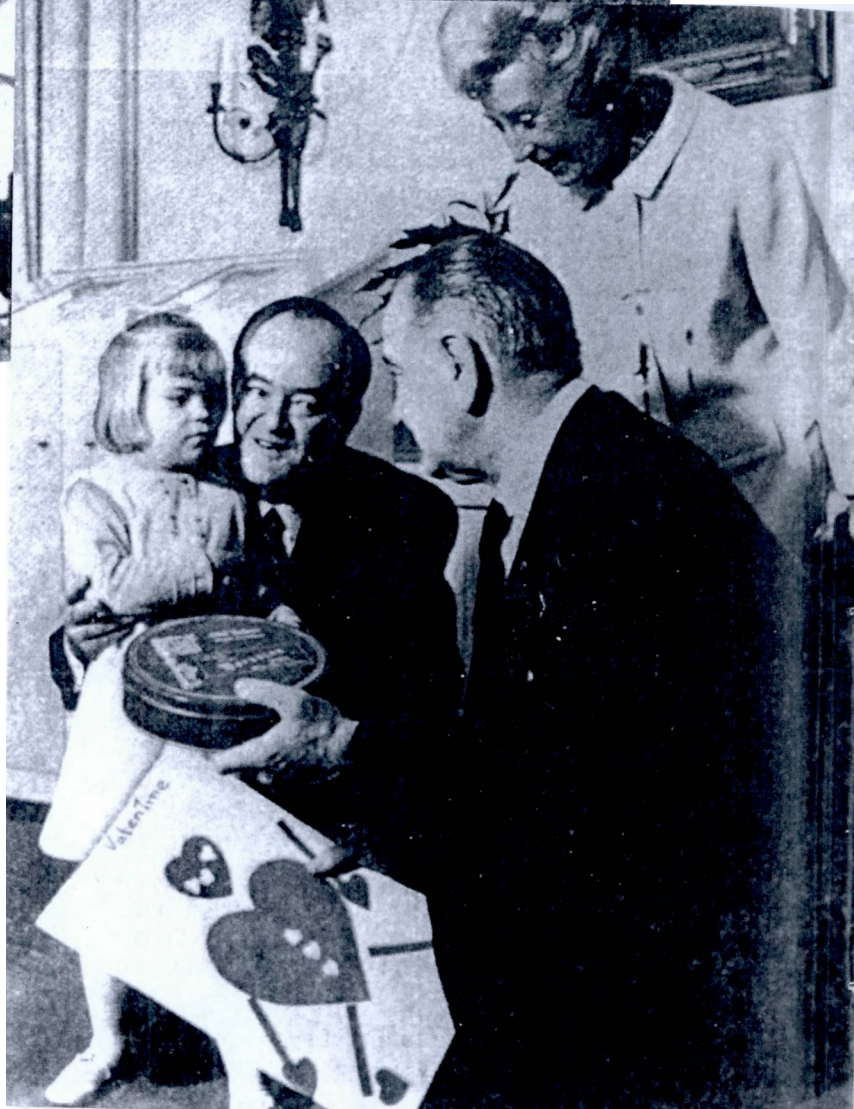
The achievements of Louise Whitbeck Fraser were recognized by educators, physicians, and civic groups over the years by the following awards and honors:

- Mother of the Year (1955);
- Service to Mankind Award (1960);
- Certified as a Registered Music Therapist (1962);
- Good Neighbor Award (1964);
- WKHO'S Who of American Women (1967);
- Civilian Citizenship Award (1968);





*Above: Muriel Humphrey with granddaughter Vicki.*



*Right: Hubert and Muriel Humphrey and their granddaughter Vicki with President Lyndon Johnson.*





*Fraser School children in a precious moment of interaction.*

- International Exchange Club, Book of Good Deeds Award (1971);
- Award from the Richfield Kiwanis Club (1971);
- Two Thousand Women of Achievement;
- Human Resources Award, Library of Human Resources of the American Heritage Resource Association (1975); and
- Outstanding Elementary Teachers of America (1975).

The programs and services of the Louise Whitbeck Fraser School continued to expand over the last decade, resulting in a name change to the Louise Whitbeck Fraser Community Services, Inc. in 1984. Today this vital organization encompasses 75 staff members and leagues of volunteers and is comprised of three divisions:

- the Fraser School for handicapped children aged 6 weeks to 8 years;
- the Whitbeck Nursery School, offering licensed day-care and nursery services to non-handicapped preschoolers; and
- the Muriel Humphrey Residences (three group homes in Eden Prairie) to serve mentally handicapped adults.

In addition to these existing services, the Corporation is building an apartment complex in Richfield to serve high-functioning adults who are developmentally delayed. All of these programs continue to reflect Louise Whitbeck Fraser's fundamental objective of her original Home Study School — "To educate the mentally handicapped by developing a curriculum that allows each person to reach his maximum growth and development, academically, socially, and occupationally. And the school still believes in the effectiveness of music. When a person is in touch with his own music he can become a part of the world around him."

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